

Social democracy is the right path for the Labour Party, although Liberals should see fit to critique it. A return of ideology to political debates will make Liberal politics worth fighting for

In response to Peter Redford's call for a renewed support for social democratic values within the Labour Party, [Tim Oliver](#) offers three Liberal critiques of the social democratic approach and advises the Liberal Democrats to ask what shape of Liberalism might lead them into the next election.



Liberalism and social democracy have had a strange history in recent decades in British politics – apparently united, in name at least, by the Alliance and then the Liberal Democrats; then the movement of Labour into the centre ground under Blair, seemingly leaving social democracy behind, spurned by the wayside of politics. [Lord Hattersley and Dr Hickson's article](#) is a strong volley of fire from that wayside; as this author will go on to address, a welcome one as well.

However it is important to examine the claims of social democrats, contained in the article, as to why their ideological vision best suits Britain; to critically evaluate their claims for relative success in being able to understand what ails Britain and what can best treat her. Liberalism will be the vehicle of choice for this article – not necessarily a strictly Liberal Democrat perspective, but a view from a broader legacy of Liberalism as it has evolved in this country. It has become infused with such ideas as environmentalism and localism as the latter half of the twentieth century has progressed and represents a positive challenge to the orthodoxy of big interests espoused by the two larger parties. This article cannot hope to cover all potential Liberal critiques of social democracy, and so will offer three principle lines of attack, beginning with localism.

Any Liberal critique of social democracy must begin with the issue of the location of power within Britain. Liberalism is arguably an instinctively iconoclastic ideology, seeking to overturn vested interests which block out the penetration of public understanding and power from the economy and government. The principle of subsidiarity – that decisions must be taken closest to the people who are affected by them – comes from this; seeking to move power for decision making away from distant Whitehall and into town halls up and down Britain.

The clarion call for a stronger central state in the article therefore stands diametrically opposed to this principle of subsidiarity and localism more widely. The critique is advanced that inequality will develop and become embedded as wealthier areas withdraw services for the poor and poorer areas lack capital to invest in overcoming poverty. Yet even *The Orange Book* makes it clear that central government should set minimum standards for services to be delivered – for example, targets for literacy among primary school children. Local authorities should then be free to find the best way possible to spend public money to achieve those goals. This is about encouraging government to break out of restrictive practices and outdated measures imposed from afar and work with various partners in the community to achieve the best services for their communities.

Essentially, localism and Liberalism come together to argue that this isn't about an arbitrary level of state control – if local authorities can meet their targets by expanding local public ownership, or rolling back government, then so be it. What matters is that people are empowered in how these decisions are taken – and moving power to local level places power in peoples' hands in an extremely definitive way. The social democratic argument of the need to move power back to the central state – out of the hands of local government and ultimately away from peoples' lives and into the distant Whitehall bubble – is a negative vision of Britain. If social democracy is really about empowering people to live their lives – about moving beyond negative and positive freedoms and talking about freedom in a holistic sense – why does it involve neutering whole tiers of government and draining their resources and powers away to a single central body? There are limits to how much can be moved – no Liberal the author knows of has suggested moving banking reform to Parish Council level, for example – but large scale reform will empower people in a very real and radical way.

The other problem with the strong central state for Liberals comes from another ideal long held close to their hearts – internationalism. The Liberal Party was the first to call for entry into Europe in the 1950s and was an early advocate of humanitarian intervention. This is more than starry-eyed dreaming of the possibilities of a

federal Europe – there is recognition that some issues have become global and moved upon beyond the level of the strong central state to respond to. These can be environmental, criminal or nautical, or indeed any number of other areas that involve actors and forces that simply do not recognise or respect borders.

Hattersley and Hickson are sadly silent on the European Union and how social democrats should respond to the central issue that it represents – how do sovereign states respond to a world in which powerful markets and other cross-border forces have the power to lay them low with breath taking speed and pass over into their neighbours and do the same. A strong central state in Britain may prove to be little more than flotsam in the face of the collapse of the global financial system without international organisations to help respond. This means devolving power up to them, away from the central state, if they are to be effective. Liberalism wrestles with the problem of doing so and keeping these structures accountable – the tension between subsidiarity and internationalism – but recognises that both are important if people are to be more engaged in politics and if politics is to continue being able to respond to the issues that face people, communities and states.

Another potential Liberal critique is the assertion that only the central state can guarantee rights; that civil society is not a threat to rights but it is insufficient to guarantee them. Liberals would contend that it requires both to protect rights – the state can and has been shown to be able to take away civil rights in excess when it feels threatened. Civil society is needed to push back against the state when it grows too over mighty and starts to impede on the lives of citizens. Without one, the other becomes dangerous in this equation – a plural, open society and state are best placed to fulfil rights. Liberals can and should argue in favour of both – even if that means defending the right to speak or assemble of groups with whom they share not one jot of political thought, such as the BNP.

In conclusion, three main Liberal critiques have been offered of the social democratic approach. The disenfranchisement of communities and the timidity of their approach to reform through their centralisation; the failure to respond to globalisation and the EU question facing Britain and lastly the need to recognise that it takes both state and civil society to protect rights. Yet; this author firmly believes social democracy to be right for the Labour Party. The return of ideology to our political debates provides sorely needed intellectual rigour and ammunition, and though I disagree with social democracy, Hattersley and Hickson should be congratulated for opening this debate so well. I hope my own party will now engage in their own debate over what shape of Liberalism they want to lead them into the next election and beyond. It would be a politics worth fighting for, then.